

# In search of inspiration

By Tom Martin

BUSINESS LEXINGTON

**"E**ducation is an investment, not a cost. It is a debt the present owes to the future."

- THE BUSINESS FORUM ON KENTUCKY EDUCATION, AUGUST 2005

"If you plan cities for cars and traffic, you get cars and traffic. If you plan for people and places, you get people and places."

- PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES, JUNE 2005

On June 14, scores from Lexington will travel to Oklahoma City for Commerce Lexington's 67th annual Leadership Visit seeking ideas (for background, see "Biztory" on page 26). Much of Lexington's widely recognized quality of life can be attributed to inspirations acquired on past journeys to cities ranging from Toronto and Houston to Austin, Ann Arbor and Providence.

Oklahoma City offers twin opportunities to confirm and envision. Many of its most outstanding recent developments already exist in Lexington. The way in which the citizens of Oklahoma City acted to acquire those assets and have since leveraged the results to even greater gain, however, offers a tantalizing vision for our city.

## About Oklahoma City

It is a story that was well-explained in an article in Business Lexington's May 6, 2005 issue written by the New Cities Foundation for a series on role model communities:

In 1993, Oklahoma City was a city in crisis. This is not about the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995 that killed 168 people — although the way citizens responded to that horror is an inspiring example of how coming together as a community can enrich lives.

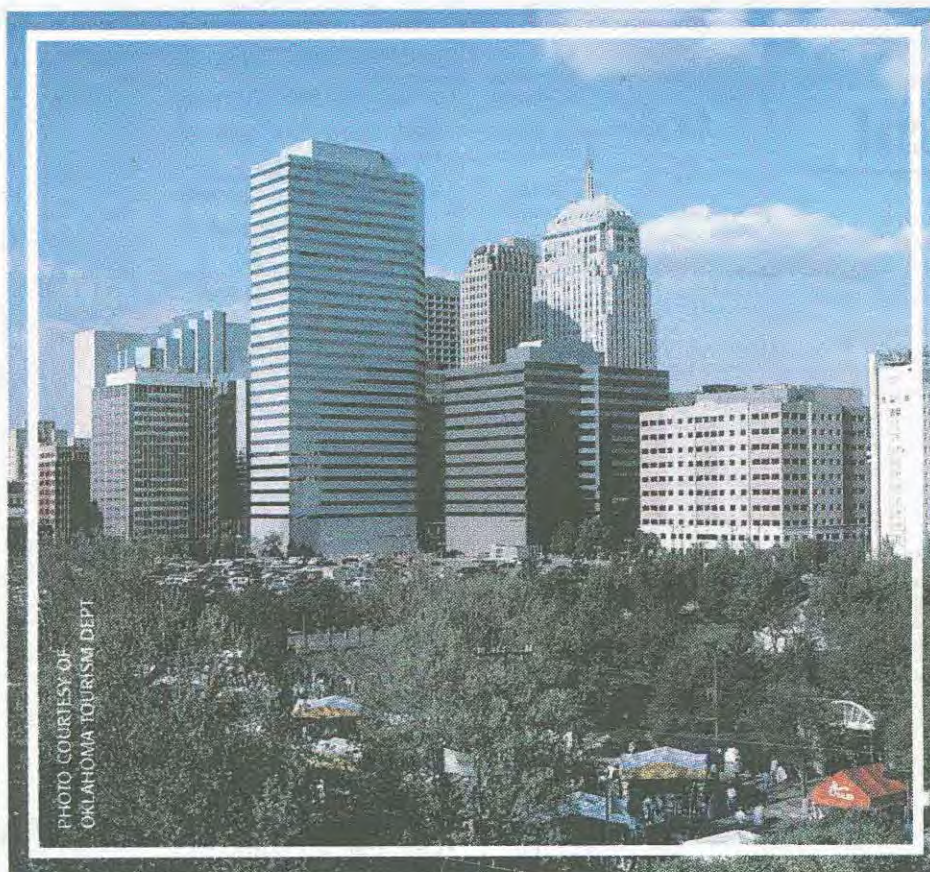
Even before being challenged by that tragedy, Oklahoma City had begun to overcome a serious problem that threatened its vitality.

The roots of the crisis lay in a lost opportunity. United Airlines was considering locating a large airplane maintenance facility in Oklahoma City. To secure the decision, the city and state offered incentives, and local civic leaders began a booster campaign of theretofore-unseen dimensions.

The community itself told a passionate story about the importance of the airline jobs to them. But all these efforts fell on unsympathetic ears at United, which chose to locate elsewhere.

The reason was glaring: United officials pointedly said that no one wanted to live in Oklahoma City because of the low quality of life.

The admission "was like a punch in the face," said one city official at the time. Sure, Oklahoma City wasn't perfect, but quality of life was one thing city officials assumed they had in abundance.



It would have been easy for local leaders to respond like many cities in similar situations do — by staying in denial. They could have just claimed it was "the other guy" who was mistaken.

Oklahoma City didn't do that. Instead, city officials saw the situation for what it was: a challenge to "compete or retreat." And compete they did. Energized by the challenge, officials launched a visionary project — one that would change the face of Oklahoma City forever.

Their plan was called Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPs), one of the most aggressive and successful public-private partnerships ever undertaken in the United States. The current amount being spent in this partnership exceeds \$1 billion. After determining the scope of the project, city leaders needed a way to pay for it. They could demand federal funds, but it would place their dreams at the mercy and whims of politics. They could borrow the money, but a hefty burden would fall on future generations.

City leaders settled on a local sales tax that would let them raise funds for the projects and then be debt free when the program was completed. Local voters were naturally uncomfortable. To ease their concerns, local leaders promised that the tax would be as small as possible, would last for the shortest time possible, and the money would only be spent on very visible public projects.

The voters were persuaded. A temporary one cent sales tax was approved in December 1993. In late 1998, voters were asked to extend the tax six months to allow for collection of all the funds still needed.

As promised, the tax was retired on

July 1, 1999. During the 66 months it was in effect, more than \$500 million was collected. In addition, the revenue earned over \$54 million in interest, which also was used for MAPs projects.

The MAPs board created projects in two distinct areas: capital building projects and recreation and beautification. Most of these facilities already exist in Lexington: a ballpark; a renovated and expanded convention center; an indoor sports arena that, like Rupp Arena, can be reconfigured for concerts, shows and exhibition; and a four-story, 112,000-square-foot downtown library.

Perhaps Oklahoma City's most innovative item, the Bricktown Canal, rings familiar with those advocating for a linear park, with a water feature as its centerpiece, stretching through downtown Lexington. Oklahoma City's mile-long, \$50 million canal links downtown and the Bricktown areas, including the Bricktown Ballpark and new office buildings — one of which is the world headquarters for the Sonic Corporation.

A peaceful promenade winds past restaurants, shops, and entertainment venues. Farther out from the core, the canal is more heavily landscaped and welcomes joggers and bicyclists.

Water taxis take tourists and residents alike on lazy trips up and down the canal. The waterway is one large reason that downtown Oklahoma City now welcomes millions of visitors annually. It also has served as leverage for significant private investments in the area in such things as lofts and new businesses.

## Moving on to education

Clearly excited by what they had

wrought so far, Oklahoma City voters returned to the polls on November 13, 2001, to approve the "MAPs for Kids" OCMAPS program, designed to improve the city school system. The original MAPs served as a model for the schools program. In fact, many of the people who worked on MAPs are now working on OCMAPS. The program's temporary sales tax for schools will be collected until 2008, with 70 percent going to the city's urban district and 30 percent going to the suburban districts.

A governing body, The OCMAPS Trust, was placed in charge of sales tax funds and management of bond projects. The trust is composed of seven members appointed by the Oklahoma City Council and the Oklahoma City School District.

The City OCMAPS Office is responsible for management and control systems, budgets, cash flow, oversight of design and construction contracts, and comprehensive reporting. The office manages all urban school projects as well as the suburban schools funding program.

Oklahoma City's record of success to date: one new high school completed, four schools completely renovated, two new high schools under construction, one new elementary school under construction and \$9 million invested in a new bus fleet.

## Lessons for Lexington

Lexington also is in crisis mode; not of the "shock and awe" variety, but more like that of the frog who slowly boils to death, the water turned up so slowly he doesn't realize he's being cooked.

Our looming crisis is in our educational infrastructure. Under Kentucky's SEEK formula, the Fayette County school system receives little fiscal support from the state and is 75 percent locally funded. An expanding population is increasing the demand for new schools even while existing buildings are in desperate need of renovation. Consequently, Fayette County schools have an estimated \$183.7 million in unmet needs. Those dollars will not come, if ever, from anyone other than residents of Fayette County. And our local economy cannot anticipate robust growth without superior schools.

When Lexington citizens travel to Oklahoma City in mid-June, they will find a place whose citizens are justifiably proud of what they have accomplished. Their decision to compete, instead of retreat, has rewarded them not only with a greater self-esteem but also with economic success.

Oklahoma City's self-reliant approach to renaissance provides inspiration for a city in transition such as ours. We would do well to take note and consider as we approach decisions that will impact the character and nature of this place we call home for generations to come.